

From time to time, people ask me which verse of the Bible is the most important. Any answer to that question is a personal value judgment. That said, I usually tell them that, in my opinion, the greatest verse in the Bible is the magnificent affirmation by St. John, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

“That statement,” said Martin Luther, “is the Gospel in a capsule.” A brilliant and perceptive theologian once pointed out that if all the Bibles in the world were destroyed and every page of scripture obliterated, if one Christian could remember that one verse, the most basic premise of our faith would survive. John 3:16 is the very heart of the Christian message.

Like many of the great verses in John’s Gospel, John 3:16 is set in the context of a fascinating incident. The setting is Jerusalem. A Pharisee named Nicodemus came to see Jesus under the cover of darkness to converse with the Master about some of his teachings. We meet Nicodemus several times in the New Testament. He went with Joseph of Arimathea to beg for the body of Jesus and see that he was given a decent burial. After the Resurrection, it was Nicodemus who joined with Gamaliel to plead for a fair trial for Peter and John when they were hauled before the Sanhedrin for preaching. The clandestine meeting between Nicodemus and Jesus as recorded by John is probably the first time the two of them met.

Nicodemus was a member of the Jewish establishment. His name literally means “Conqueror of the People.” This is not a pejorative term. Rather, it is an appellation of respect and affection. Nicodemus was a leader of the Hebrews. Obviously, he was a man of means, and he was fascinated with the teachings of Jesus. Throughout the conversation between them, there is an element of mutual respect.

As John tells the story of their meeting, it is obvious that Nicodemus has come to Jesus to discuss the process of salvation. Jesus talks to this leader about the miracle of rebirth, the mystery of the Holy Spirit, and the meaning of Baptism. At the end of their conversation, Jesus sums up the whole meaning of who he is and what his mission is in one simple statement about God’s love, the response of humanity, and the promise of life eternal.

When one carefully analyses this sixteenth verse in the third chapter of the Gospel According to St. John, three basic themes become evident: the love of God, the gift of God’s Son, and the promise of eternal life. Let’s explore these themes and examine their meaning.

The first theme is God’s love for the world.

Here as in most places in the sacred texts, the writer is not referring simply to *Terra Firma*, the planet earth, but to the entire universe. God loves all of it. Love Divine was the motivation in the heart of God from the beginning. God’s everlasting love always goes the greatest lengths to find expression.

There is another familiar passage from John’s Gospel in which Jesus says, “I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. No one comes to the Father except by me.” We often hear those words in exclusivistic terms. A rabbi and some Christian clergy were talking about that passage and the rabbi said, “I believe it.” When pressed as to how he, a Jew, could agree with a passage like that, which seems to exclude all but the followers of Jesus,

he said, “Jesus’ way was the way of love. Jesus truth was the truth of love. Jesus life was the life of love. God is love. The only way to the Father is the way of love – love answering love.”

In Jesus Christ, God says to God’s universe, “I love you.” The only fitting response is for us to spend our lives finding ways to say, “I love you too.” God is constantly searching for us, calling to us, wooing us into that relationship that heals what is broken and unwell – that makes us whole.

It is fascinating to make a comparative study of the religions of the world. Almost every religion has humanity’s search for God as its basic premise. Judaism and Christianity are exceptions. Both the Hebrew Testament and the Christian Testament are the long record of God’s search for humanity – a quest that is grounded in God’s love. Listen carefully: Jesus does not say, “For humanity so loved God.” He says, “For God so loved the world.” That is the basic premise upon which the Gospel is built. It all begins with the love of God.

Then, the extent of God’s love is spelled out. God love the world so much that he gave his only Son.

When the New Testament uses the term *Son of God* to explain the impact of Jesus upon the human situation, the words are chosen very carefully. In the ancient mind, a Son was the extension of his father’s personality. He was part and parcel of his father’s personhood. Thus, when the Bible identifies Jesus as the Son of God, it is projecting Jesus as a projection of God. Jesus is not just a representative of God, he is an expression of God’s very being. God’s gift of the Son is the gift of God’s own life.

Yesterday, Gay and I attended a seminar by John Philip Newell at Christ Church Cathedral in Lexington. During one of his talks, he related how one of his professors in seminary had made the case that in reading the Prologue to John’s Gospel, one could substitute “Gift” for “Word” so that it might read, “In the beginning was the Gift...and the Gift was with God and the Gift was God.” His point was that from the beginning of time God has been giving God’s self and Jesus Christ is the fullest expression of that self-giving.

In this context, to give a son is to share a part of one’s self and to establish a bond that cannot be broken. When God gave God’s Son, it meant to take the hurt, the suffering, and the heartbreak of the world and make it his own.

And, there is the promise of eternal life.

The first Christian teachings about eternal life were based on the thought of St. Paul. Paul believed that death was a sort of sleep and that we shall be resurrected when Christ returns. Listen to the way he puts it: “I would not have you ignorant of those who have fallen asleep...We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed.” In today’s Epistle, we have about the only occasion in any of the writings attributed to Paul I which he looks at resurrection in terms other than in the future. Here he speaks of how in our union with Christ, God “made us alive with Christ...and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places.”

In this exception, Paul is more like St. John, who looks at eternal life as a NOW experience. Eternal life is not just a quantity of existence, but a quality as well. Those who comprehend the depth of God’s love and receive the gift of God’s Son by the response of faith are already participating in eternal life here and now. In fact, the term *eternal life* is synonymous with *abundant life*, *Kingdom of God*, and *Kingdom of Heaven* – central theme of Jesus’ mission.

It is the universal task of every Christian to bear this message in every relationship because it is the central affirmation of our faith, the greatest hope, and the best news the world has ever known. “For God the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”

Eternal life is a life in which we are constantly learning to love as God loved, through radical self-giving. Jesus taught that whenever we love like that, his joy is in us and our joy is complete. “Love one another,” says Jesus, “just as I have loved you.”